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Editor Kate Sprutta Elliott
 Managing Editor Terri Lackey
 Editor, *Café* Elizabeth McBride

Art Direction On Track Marketing
 Cover Sergii Salivon
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PROTECTION AND PEACE

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 10 DECEMBER 2013

As people of faith, we need to look out for those who are the least able to care for themselves. We can show God's love in the way we treat those who are vulnerable.

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VOICES

Gifts of the Season

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

Everything is coming up babies! As I write this, several young friends are expecting babies. (A few of them will be here before you receive this in the mail.) I follow their expectant journeys on Facebook and marvel at their maturity and strength as they get ready to welcome new life. I have never had a baby, but I can imagine that, like the season of Advent, it's a time of anticipation, preparation, and longing.

This issue of *Gather* has plenty of babies. The Bible study writer Kay Ward tells us "the theme of this session is experienced in the saving of baby Moses on the Nile, the infant Jesus born in a stable, and a story of mothers and grandmothers everywhere." She shares that she is a new grandmother—with all the enthusiasm (and photos) that entails.

The Bible study is not the only place we're meeting babies. Paul-Edison Swift writes about getting to know his first grandchild, "I got to 'be the grandma,' doing those things mothers and aunts and sisters and friends have done for generations. I kept up with the laundry and dish washing. I relieved Sean during the wee-early morning Walter shift. It was then I would feed Walter breast milk using an eye dropper. The experience was like the superglue of bonding." Apparently grandmothers are not the only ones who get smitten with a new grandbaby. Walter is now three, and by the time you read this, he will be joined by a new little sister.

The stories of Moses and Jesus are stories of babies in danger. But with

God's protection and help from unlikely people—Pharoah's daughter? The three Magi?—those babies grow up to do God's work. Terri Speirs tells what she learned about protection from her own family. "I used to think that protection was about strength. I kept waiting for that parental strength to come. As my children grew from needy infants to busy toddlers to complicated school kids, I wondered when I would be less tired or worried or distracted. Or when I'd make more money, or have more time, or at least be more joyful. These are the things I thought I needed to be a good parent. But...I realize protecting others is less about flexing power and more about giving from weakness."

One of the gifts this time of year brings is music. In "Make a Joyful Noise," Audrey West explores the power of music: "Every year on Christmas Eve, as it has done for about 250 years, a trombone choir announces the birth of Christ from the bell tower of the oldest Moravian church in Bethlehem, Pa., ... the season's reminder that God comes to us, again and again and once for all, in the child born to Mary in that first Bethlehem, half a world away and more than two millennia ago." Are there carols that especially move you? What hymns do you most look forward to singing at Christmas worship?

On behalf of the *Gather* staff, I wish you Advent and Christmas blessings. May you find peace and joy as you celebrate the greatest gift of all—Jesus. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Gather*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Protection from Afar

by Veronica Garcia-Robles

It is difficult to let go of one's child and trust that things will be OK, especially when we fear for their safety. In potentially dangerous situations, it's hard not to hold on tightly to my child even as she attempts to get free to test the waters herself. Yet, I've realized that if I never let go, how could she ever show that she listened and learned the lessons I've taught her over the years?

I can't imagine what it must have been like for Moses' mother who, to save him from Pharaoh's decree that all Hebrew newborn boys be killed, was forced to let her 3-month-old baby go. Safeguarding her son, she waterproofed the basket in which she hid him. What a sacrifice to part with a child at an age when he is utterly helpless and at the mercy of whoever might pluck him from the river. Entrusting him to God's protection, she saw him float away on the Nile while his big sister, Miriam, followed, watchfully protecting him from afar.

Protecting from a distance, Miriam's example reminds me of how my mother followed me as I began walking to school by myself. Watching and following me from a distance, I never knew she was there to protect me in case I needed it while I tested the waters of my newfound freedom.

Necessity drove Moses' mother to let him go, just as it leads all parents eventually to let go, so that their children can spread their wings, trust themselves and the lessons their parents taught them. And, in that newfound freedom, they can finally understand that those lessons and

rules were never intended as a means of control, but of loving protection.

Moses' mother had great courage in letting go and trusting God to protect her son. The season of Advent also highlights God's courage in letting Jesus go to be born into a broken, suffering world and entrusting him to the care and protection of Mary and Joseph, a young, untried woman and an ordinary man. Had Moses' mother or God not let go of their children to spread their wings, test the waters, and grow into the people they were meant to become, where would everyone be? Would the Israelites ever have had their savior from slavery? Would we ever have had a savior who redeems us from our sins?

Courage is hard to come by when fear of the unknown looms near. Yet, it is comforting to know someone is looking after us, protecting us from afar; like my mother who watched as I'd cross the street, or Miriam who followed and protected her baby brother, and like God, who was there for Jesus whenever needed. It is easier to be courageous in the face of the unknown and the many challenges we face throughout our lives knowing we are not alone. For, in sending God's son into our world, God became our protector in the person of Jesus, following and protecting us from afar, but always near enough to help us should we ever need him. 🌿

Veronica Garcia-Robles, a graduate of California Lutheran University, Harvard Divinity School, and member of Bethel Lutheran Church, lives in the Netherlands with her husband and daughter.

WALTER ALBRIGHT



by Paul Edison-Swift

When *Gather* invited me to write on the gifts and lessons learned from grandparenting, I jumped at the opportunity. My grandson, Walter, age 21 months, is the light of my life. Now, with the deadline bearing down, I wonder what I was thinking. And so, I'll apply the first of my list of Walter Lessons right now:

Join the game even if you're not the best.

As yet, Walter cannot throw a Frisbee. This, however, does not keep him from the game. When a Frisbee is thrown near him, he picks it up and gleefully runs back to the thrower. So, I'm going to share my thoughts even though I know many *Gather* readers are better qualified grandparents to write this article.

Prayer: God, push us outside our comfort zones and into all kinds of new, wonderful experiences.

Childbirth is risky.

When Walter Paul Edison-Albright arrived in October 2011, I was kind of mad at the little guy for putting my only child, Annie, through a very difficult pregnancy and a dangerous 42-hour labor followed by a C-section. As can be expected, once he arrived and my daughter's condition stabilized, all animosity evaporated, followed by extreme love.

My wife, Sue, and I were privileged to join daughter Annie and son-in-law, Sean, in the labor room. After

OME

*We will give thanks to the Lord forever;
“from generation to generation
we will recount your praise.”
(Psalm 79:13)*

the surgery that brought Walter into the world, I was in the room where Walter had his first bath, and was weighed and foot-printed. Birth is risky and gritty. What a vulnerable and messy way for God to choose to enter the world.

*Prayer: O God, thank you for love so deep,
so vulnerable, you risked entering
our world as a baby.*

Being a grandma

A difficult delivery and difficult recovery meant that Momma needed extra help upon returning home from the hospital. As relatively new employees at their jobs, Sean and Sue had limited time off. As a 24-year veteran of the ELCA in Chicago, I was grateful for the time off and the supportive colleagues who made it possible for me to stay with the new little family for the first two weeks of Walter's life.

As a result, I got to “be the grandma,” doing those things mothers and aunts and sisters and friends have

done for generations. I kept up with the laundry and dish washing. I relieved Sean during the wee-early morning Walter shift. It was then I would feed Walter breast milk using an eye dropper. The experience was like the superglue of bonding.

I don't know why I was so surprised about what a big deal this was. People warned me.

The joys of grandparenthood are pretty well known and pretty well described in the media and in our communities. In her book, *The Gift of Years, Growing Older Gracefully*, Sister Joan Chittister describes life as “a mosaic, made up of multiple pieces, each of them full in itself, each a stepping stone on the way to the rest of it ... Each of them makes us new. And each of them has a purpose.”

I don't know how it happened, but my life was certainly made new when little Walter arrived, giving me a new sense of purpose and meaning.

*Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the gift of time.
Thank you for blessings of ordinary life.*

Passion

Walter is exposed to lots of hymns, between church and parents who sing him to bed at night with the likes of *Dona Nobis Pacem* (which Walter requests often and Annie and Sean sing in canon). One hymn Walter picked up with just occasional exposure is “Halle, Halle, Hallelujah,” which he sings often, especially enjoying the extended “Loo-oo-h-ya.” For fun I found the hymn in our music collection and played it for him. After one, then two, then three plays, he insisted, “MORE Halle, Halle!”

This enthusiasm and passion exhibited itself again when we were singing “This Little Light of Mine” with Walter on one of our many video calls (he often requests “Light”). I’ll never forget during one call, when we got to the verse about “Hide it under a bushel,” Walter’s loud, plaintive response was “Noooooooooooo!”

*Prayer: Dear Jesus, help us all to seek MORE
“Halle Halle” in our lives, and to let your
light shine with passion.*

More communion!

Just as we all need more “Halle, Halle” in our lives, we all need to remember what a gift is set for us at the table in our congregations. Last week, something amazing happened when my daughter, Pastor Annie, gave Walter a blessing and her husband, Sean, communion. On their way back to their seats, Walter asked Sean, “Dada has?” (“What do you have, Daddy?”)

“Communion,” said Sean.

“Walter eat it?”

“Do you want to eat it? Let’s talk to Mama about it.”

“Yes!”

So, after the service they went to the kitchen where Annie gave Walter an unconsecrated wafer to try. Walter was delighted. He took it from Annie and ate it with glee.

“Is it good?” Annie asked Walter.

“Good!” he exclaimed.

As they were about to leave the kitchen, Walter ran back to the cupboard where Annie produced the wafer and tried to open the door. “More communion!” he said. Pastor Annie said, “You’ll get more next week! you’ll take communion with Dada. Good?” Walter said, “Good.”

*Prayer: Thank you for welcoming us to your table,
loving Christ. It is so good, so good indeed!*

Compassion

There’s no TV for Walter, which is not to say he doesn’t appreciate (and beg) for a good Sesame Street YouTube video on occasion. A serious favorite is “Cookie Monster and the Ballad of Casey Macphee.” I won’t spoil the experience for you (Google it, now!) but let’s just say, Cookie Monster gets through a tight situation. With MANY viewings, Walter would sincerely ask, each time, “Cookie OK?” And the adults with him, and the story itself, would reassure him that Cookie Monster was OK. This seems to be the season of concern for Walter, as he will on many occasions say “Baba OK?” “Hankee (the dog) OK?” When anyone near him is hurt, he runs to them, offering concern and kisses. While I don’t want Walter to worry too much, I do hope he keeps a strong sense of compassion about others, known and unknown.

*Prayer: Compassionate God, open our eyes to see
and to respond to the hurt we see all around us,
and the hurt we can’t see, too.*

Sheer joy and abandonment

There’s nothing like the enthusiasm and joy of a grandchild to wake you up to the wonder—and fun—of the world around you. It’s impossible to pretend to be “cool” when I’m with Walter. His unrestrained delight is my delight, too.

*Prayer: God of surprising joy, help me experience
your creation and your creatures in a new way,
with the wonder and delight of a child.*

Learning from other grandparents

I have been observing and learning from other grandparents. My former boss, Kristi Bangert, and her husband, the Rev. Mark Bangert, take each of their grandchildren to Washington, D.C., the year they turn 10. Ornette ("Gramby") and Ken Bruce who attend countless games, performances, and ceremonies of their grandchildren. Or my own spouse, Sue, who lets her fun and silly side shine, just like it did more than 30 years ago with Annie.

Prayer: Gracious God, help us do and be our best as grandparents.

All God's children

There are many lessons to be learned in the context of your grandchild and their congregation. While I thought Walter had a special place at Redeemer, being the pastor's kid and all, I started noticing that the same members who shared their love and attention with Walter did so with all of the other children of the congregation too.

I find that I'm certainly more interested in babies, all babies (hand me that baby!), after being with Walter for a weekend and then feeling that empty spot on my chest and shoulder. Former *Lutheran Woman Today* columnist and gifted theologian, Marj Leegard, told the story of a woman who made sure she knew the name of every baby baptized in the congregation. When Marge asked her why, she replied, "How else do you pray for them?"

Prayer: Father and Mother of us all, expand my heart to pray for and care for all children, around the world and close to home. 🌿

Paul Edison-Swift is a web analyst/developer for the ELCA IT department, and spouse to Sue Edison-Swift ("Umma"), father to the Rev. Anne Edison-Albright, and "Baba" (Grandpa) to Walter Paul Edison-Albright. Sally Joan Edison-Albright, grandchild number two, arrived in August 2013.



My dad teaches me about living generously. The way he models giving and service to God and others has always been a huge inspiration to me. A wonderful recent example of this came when my son, his first grandchild, was born. We have this picture (taken at 3 a.m.) of my dad feeding my son with an eye dropper. Dropper feeding is something you do when you want to encourage breastfeeding but the baby needs additional food while waiting for Mom's milk to come in. It is not an easy thing to do: You put your pinky finger in the baby's mouth, get him to suck on it, and then sneak the dropper in, trying to make sure the milk doesn't dribble out the side. A slow, painstaking process, one tiny dropper at a time. When I see that picture, I get a glimpse of the generous, patient, nourishing and nurturing love of God.

—Pastor Anne Edison-Swift, from "Five lessons we learned from our fathers" on Living Lutheran blog.



EARTH WISE

Bleak Midwinter

by Terry L. Bowes

In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.

— Christina Rossetti (1872)

What a marvelous and

evocative adjective: Bleak. Cold and raw, lacking in warmth, life, or kindliness; dismal (Webster). My gardens right now in December are indeed bleak. Rose bushes that were blooming extravagantly just a few weeks ago now resemble thorny bundles of lifeless sticks. The tomato plants that kept me hopping picking their ripe fruit have been reduced to limp, black vines. The dried corn stalks have lost their brief decorative appeal and now stand sentry over a dying landscape.

The deciduous trees have unceremoniously dumped their leaves on the lawn and now look naked and exposed. The evergreen trees are chuckling at them. I miss the songs of birds.

We actually yearn for “snow on snow” to bless the dry soil with moisture. Snow doesn’t hang around here in Colorado for long. We rarely have to see piles of dirty snow accumulating along the sides of the road. The warm Chinook (“snow eater”) winds sweep down the mountains in the winter and melt the snow. The Chinooks may not be frosty, but they do indeed moan.

Now, gentle reader, you may well

live in a climate where palm trees sway. You may live in a place where cacti thrive and the sun’s energy warms the earth, your home, and your spirit. You may be appreciating tropical flowers. If so, know that I envy you right now. Appreciate the fact that “bleak” is a foreign word for you in your environment. Hug a fruit tree for me.

Soon, the cold will seep deep into the soil here, turning “earth hard as iron.” The water in the horses’ water tanks freezes solid. We keep an axe nearby to hack our way through the ice. The water is indeed “like a stone.”

Daylight hours continue to shorten until the winter solstice on December 22. That is bleak and depressing for someone like me with Seasonal Affective Disorder. Yet the optimist in me looks for signs of hope. The light of Christmas will glow just as the days grow longer.

For me, the melancholy of December is offset a bit by relief. Pruning and weeding don’t demand my time and attention. The yard doesn’t need to be mowed. I can put my canning supplies away and reclaim my kitchen. However, having my daily priorities shift from the exterior world to the interior is a major annual adjustment for me. While I derive joy from crawling in dirt, I chafe and grumble about the chores of dusting and vacuuming my nest.

This move indoors, however, also provides me an opportunity to unleash my creative spirit in ways that pulling weeds could not. I blow the dust off my sewing machine and take inventory of the

fabric and thread that have been languishing while cultivating occupied my time. I contemplate homemade Christmas gifts that I can share: aprons, quilts, chocolate zucchini bread, and pickled beets that I canned just a few weeks ago. I make extra donations to our local food bank.

So, the bleak midwinter can be a time of exciting creativity and looking forward to new possibilities. The season of Advent compels me to take inventory of my faith and life. Advent invites us all to take an innovative look at Christmas and the church of Christ. As each Advent candle is lit, I contemplate how its message will call me to action in the coming year. How will I respond to the message of the Prophecy Candle, the candle of hope? Where will I celebrate the Bethlehem Candle, the candle of preparation? The Shepherd's Candle, the candle of joy speaks to my life. Can I hear the anthems of the Angel Candle, the candle of love? Is the Christ Candle as central in my life as it is in the Advent wreath?

As the Christmas advertising circulars stop arriving in my mailbox, the seed catalogs for the next year begin arriving. I can surround myself with those colorful signs of hope and rub my hands together in glee. Instead of sugar plums dancing in my head, my dreams are filled with tomatoes and snapdragons.

In *The Night Before Christmas*, Clement Moore writes: "Mama in her 'kerchief and I in my cap, had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap..." I truly appreciate a good winter nap. I curl up under an afghan with a boring

book, read for five minutes and sleep for 25. My brain that swirls with Christmas plans (and six family birthdays!) when I am awake, settles for a bit during my nap. The rest rejuvenates and energizes me. After a nap, I'm ready to take on the world. Rest is nothing short of critical to our physical and mental health.

The garden, too, needs to rest. While it is not nearly as vibrant now as it was in the summer and fall, it is certainly not dead. The earthworms tunnel more



deeply into the earth, oxygenating the soil as they travel. Underground, the garlic bulbs are developing their distinctive smell and taste. The tulip and jonquil bulbs are gathering strength to erupt in color for Easter. There is nothing bleak about that! 🌱

Terry L. Bowes and her husband, Steve, raised three kids and dozens of Quarter horses for 25 years in Colorado. When their three grandchildren were born, Terry became a professional grandmother, serving as their child-care provider. Terry and Steve downsized from a 20-acre farm to six acres, keeping three horses for the kids. Terry served as interim executive director of Women of the ELCA from 1996–1997.



LET US PRAY

Good Company: Strangers

by Julie K. Aageson

This is a story about the company of strangers. It was a Wednesday evening and the kids were hanging around the church kitchen after their evening meal before confirmation class. They noticed a stranger had wandered in, a woman looking uneasy, a bit unkempt, hesitant.

"Who is she?" one of the students asked his mother as they picked up dishes and washed the tables. He was clearly aware the stranger needed something. "Is she hungry? What does she want? Who is she, Mom?" and to the pastor, "Does the church have money to give her?" and the response, "No, that's taken care of by the police department—a special fund." And then it was time for class.

A conversation ensued in the church kitchen. The stranger from West Texas was making her way to Western North Dakota. She'd heard there was work there, good pay, a chance to get ahead. But she was hungry, and she needed help for the last leg of her journey.

Several parents put together a box of food and then the mom and the stranger made their way to the police station to find shelter for the night. They agreed to meet at the train station the next morning where the mom bought a train ticket and the stranger boarded the train going east toward what she hoped might be a new beginning.

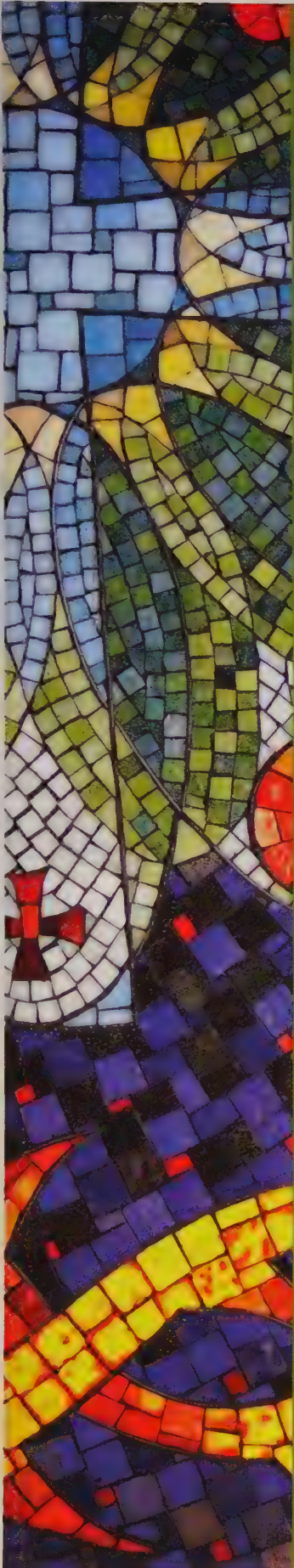
Meanwhile, my young nephew, bored stiff with confirmation and not wanting much to go to church each week (with his mother and father, hungry themselves for food that is more

than food and drink that is more than drink) experiences another way of being in church. Unable to forget the stranger in the church kitchen, he asks again, "Mom, what does she need? What should we do?" And then, "You gave her food? You bought her train ticket? How much was it? Does Dad know?"

In December, we live the experience of another woman on a journey. There is no place for her to stay and she is young, pregnant, and without resources. The child she is carrying is ready to be born. This stranger is weary and there is no place for her to stay until someone makes room in a crude stall where animals feed. A manger becomes a hallowed place just as a church kitchen provides more than food, a mom and a stranger become a confirmation lesson and a young nephew learns something more than catechism.

On the wall in my study is a drawing and a description of another stranger: a teenage girl and her baby panhandling outside the Holiday Inn, her dark purple hair shining in the sun. The hotel clerk steps outside and tells her to be off and then wonders to himself, "Would anyone recognize the Christ child if they happened to meet?" And on the off chance that we may *not* recognize Christ in the strangers who come our way, he too stopped what he was doing to share some food and a train ticket. Good company indeed! Confirmation indeed! 🌿

Julie K. Aageson retired last spring from ELCA Resource Center leadership. She and her spouse now write and travel.



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Spirit of Protection

by Terri Mork Speirs

This is a story
about bathing a baby boy
in the kitchen sink.

Pudgy, pink, and sitting in the suds, the 5-month-old child, seems to have no idea of the chaos and clutter around him. This happened 14 years ago, but we have a photograph of the scene. He is in one basin, dirty dishes in the other, and there is a collection of unclean baby bottles and plastic nipples on the window shelf above.

A tiny turkey baster that is actually a child's medication applicator lies next to what looks like a jar of rhubarb jam, and what is obviously a potted cactus. It seems odd for a thorny plant to sit amidst baby. We evidently didn't notice at the time. Unused kitchen utensils, spoons and spatulas, are neatly nestled in a white porcelain container to the side. It looks like there was a lot of eating in this kitchen, but only a little actual cooking.

The wall paper is old. If this kitchen still had walls glued with stale Civil-War-era flower patterns, it's no wonder it had no modern dishwasher. It was probably the only house in that working class suburb in Baltimore that didn't have one.

There is a mound of dirty plates, bowls, and cups; and one dirty baby. Looking out the window over the sink, it is pitch black night. It was probably 7 p.m. or so in the season of Advent, when daylight falls early and darkness rises fast. The sun had already long set before I got home from work that day.

This is a story about fatigue.

It was the brand of weariness experienced by many parents of small children. I remember once asking an older friend, "When do children quit *needing* so much?" At the time I had no idea how shallow and naïve that question was. My friend kindly informed me that children are insatiable. They will always need everything we can give them. Since my husband, Bob, and I valued close emotional bonds with our children even when they were infants, we tuned-in to their need for close human interaction. We were the kind of parents who couldn't just put the baby down and let him cry. We felt obligated to be on duty with our two kids constantly.

I remember we were so exhausted one night after dinner, which likely consisted of something like hotdogs and mashed peas, we couldn't move on to the next step of the evening. We were sleepy with a full night of parental duty ahead. Bob and I literally stood from the supper table, pushed aside a pile of dirty dishes, filled the kitchen sink with soapy water, stripped our cherubic son, and plopped him in suds without having to relocate to another room. The baby in water, big brown eyes full of promise, smiled straight into the camera when I paused to snap a picture. We didn't do it to be cute. We did it because we were tired.

After days and months of rising early, commuting, working eight hours, commuting again, and then feeding the two kids supper, I remember that we felt so worn-out that neither one of us could bring ourselves to walk the 20 feet to the bathroom to draw a proper bath. We couldn't even wash the accumulating dishes. That scene multiplied by everyday and 17 years, is how I will remember my mothering.

A working mother

I almost can't remember a time when I wasn't employed outside the home. When I was younger I worked in fast food joints, flipping burgers and deep frying chicken. Waitressing, I realized later, was the way to go because if you got into a nice restaurant you could make well over minimum wage through tips, if you could manage the sexual harassment.

By the time we bathed our baby in the kitchen sink, I was working in a pretty nice office on the Inner Harbor of Baltimore. I had this international job and imagined I was

saving the world, but actually I was pushing papers. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. However, I also realize that I'd probably over indulged in self-importance.

My own mother had stayed at home with me and my three brothers, she raised us mostly on her own (my dad was a long-haul truck driver and often absent). Somehow I knew I would always work outside the home, though the logistics of doing it with babies didn't hit me until my first child was born. I'm not saying my choices always made sense, but I really didn't know any other way. Like my own mother and many other mothers, I did the best I could with what I had.

During the time period of the kitchen bath scene, Bob took on the role of so-called Mr. Mom. He learned firsthand that staying home with the kids was no easy solution to the working parent. It's lonely. It's mind-numbing. It's unaffordable. I often wonder about this dynamic we have in our country—either stay at home with your kids or go to work and put them in daycare. Neither seems optimal. Speaking from collective experience, Bob and I would say both alternatives are isolating, exhausting, and expensive, even with two of us working in collaboration. It seems like there should be a third option, a more communal option.

A dead-end job, a depressed husband, a crumbling marriage

I was a glorified desk grunt with a rigid eight-to-five schedule. (I still am, but these days I'm writing more and answering telephones less.) But I was the bread winner with two kids and a stay-at-home husband, so I conscientiously did my job every day. If today I could

offer advice to the person I was the night we bathed our baby in the kitchen sink, the advice would be three-pronged: 1) put your family first, 2) work hard, and 3) network, network, network. Building sincere, collegial relationships both inside and outside your workplace is both satisfying and essential for professional development. Broadening your pool of contacts provides a vocational strategic back-up plan should you find yourself unemployed or looking for change.

Still, I was too overwhelmed to “network, network, network.” We had just moved to a new city and so Bob was experiencing a daily slam of isolation from full-time parenting without the safety net of friends and family. I'd come home from work and ask him who he talked to that day. His answers ranged from no one, to random mothers at the park, to the morning talk show host Regis Philbin. He told me once the other mothers felt sorry for him and invited him and the kids to their playgroup. Diligently, he gave it a try, trudging the baby-in-carrier and our 3-year-old into a group of people he didn't know. The other mothers in their mid 20s, he was the only 49-year-old dad who showed up. It just felt weird, he'd decided, and he gave up going.

At 6 p.m. when I got home after a full day of in-your-face office work, Bob needed a break after a full day of in-your-face parenting. I walked in the back door and he headed straight downstairs to his man cave, in the company of a TV and a recliner. He had lived a vibrant life before we moved to that suffocating suburb. Born and raised in New York City, he made prosthetic limbs, crafted orthotic braces, built an inner-city youth program, and basked in lifelong friends and loving family.

At the time of baby in kitchen sink, Bob's life consisted of two needy little kids, a frazzled wife, and an underground room. I felt simultaneously bad for Bob and frustrated for myself. We were on year seven of our marriage and if the seven-year itch really exists, we definitely had it.

We went for months barely talking, just trying to get through each day, both of us stewing in our own thick paste of obligation and seclusion. Yet we were bound to each other by economic dependence and the children. So we pushed on with our spare relationship and bare existence, not because of that ideal "until death do us part" but more because we felt devoid of choice. We were stuck with our schedules, and we were stuck with each other.

A story about perspective

The baby in the sink didn't know that his mother was dead tired and his father was shriveling up or that they were barely talking to one another. He didn't know that many babies like him die of starvation, diarrhea, cancer, or other tragedies that break parents' hearts. He didn't know that many parents around the world were so poor that they sell their babies, or send their babies to a fate we can't imagine.

The baby in the sink wasn't picked up, like Moses, by a princess in the reeds in the Nile River only to be secretly reunited with his mother, the wet nurse. There was no wet nurse. His mother, caretaker, and wet nurse were one in the same—a beautiful and rare occurrence if you contrast his story to even a tiny bit of slavery narrative. This baby was healthy and has developed into a gorgeous teenager, in the way we wish all our children could grow. He and his sister are the realization of our dreams. Bob and I are so very blessed.

Advent provides us with the most amazing truth in the Christian storyline. That we believe in a God who chose to be revealed through human beings, and not just any human beings—but poor, vulner-

able, weak human beings, a teenage girl named Mary and a young man named Joseph who risked his own security to protect Mary. This story is as modern as today's news. If we look at all the babies in poverty, the mothers alone, the parents on the edge, the people outside, we might see God.

This is a story about gratitude.

I used to think that protection was about strength. I kept waiting for the parental strength to come. As my children grew from needy infants to busy toddlers to complicated school kids, I wondered when I would be less tired or worried or distracted. Or when I'd make more money, or have more time, or at least be more joyful. These are the things I thought I needed to be a good parent. But as my kids mature into teenagers and their young adult personalities peek out, I realize protecting others is less about flexing power and more about giving from weakness.

This is a story about the grace that seeps into our days and years, even if we can only see it in hindsight. The baby in water wasn't alone, neither were his parents. We were upheld by babysitters, teachers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, pastors, friends, and a steady stream of people who supported and encouraged us. To this day, in spite of the stress, Bob and I are on to our fourth city of joint living. We are attuned to each other's biorhythms in mysterious ways we don't understand. He remains a vigilant father and husband, more than I could ever ask for. Even in my most skeptical moments, I cannot deny the existence of love and its power to heal after counting all the people who have entered my life in the spirit of protection. The question for me is: how can I do the same for others? 🌸

Terri Mork Speirs is a writer in Des Moines, Iowa, where she lives with her two teenagers and husband, Bob, who is associate pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church. They are proud co-owners of a 2013 model, two-cycle dishwasher. Her website is www.terrimorkspeirs.blogspot.com.



MIRIAM, ANGIE

~ AND THEIR BROTHERS ~

by Angie Shannon

With great care, expectant parents devise clever ways to introduce the new baby to older siblings. They understand that with the introduction of this new little person the family dynamic will never be the same. There is much anticipation, excitement and even joy around the arrival of the new baby but the transition is often a little bumpy. To ease this, I have seen T-shirts, buttons, and all kinds of novelties telling the world that "I am a big sister" or "I am a big brother." Still, it can be tough if you are used to being the only child or the baby of the family.

Shortly after the birth of my brother John, family lore insists that I packed every piece of my toy luggage with my 3-year-old self and went to Grandma's because I decided that I did not like that baby! With Grandma Bunch and Auntie, I was the center attention and the apple of their eyes. My feet didn't touch the ground. I was the only child again!

That would come to a screeching halt when my parents made me come home and take my place in the family as the big sister. Nearly, five years later, youngest brother, Chris, completed our family. The transition was pretty smooth as I remember. At seven and a half, I liked baby dolls, and I thought it would be fun to have a little brother or sister.

On the other hand, John was not as thrilled. For John, Chris would take some getting used to



Chris, Angie, John (l-r)

because he was no longer the baby of the family. As children, we could not possibly understand how important our sibling relationship would be in

shaping us as the people we are today.

It's complicated

My brothers were my first real friends. Our parents fostered this closeness. We had a great childhood. John taught me how to climb fences, jump from trees, and how to fix things. Even now, John talks me through minor repairs over the phone.

Chris, in his introverted style, still teaches me the value of observation and silence. We grew up bickering, playing, teasing, and getting each other in and out of trouble!

Sibling relationships are complicated, and they affect the whole of our lives. Just think of some of your memories with brothers or sisters from childhood through adulthood. If you did not grow up with sisters or brothers, think about your longest peer relationships. In those relationships we find life lessons. We learn the value of having someone who has known us most of our lives, through the good, the bad, and the ugly. We learn that a disagreement does not have to mean the end of a relationship. Finally, you still had to live in the same house and eat at the same dinner table with the same parents!

And then there is sibling rivalry. Most of this is pretty innocuous but left unchecked, it can be ugly. Years ago, my childhood friend Carol came to visit me in Texas with her sons, Julian and Darius, ages 5 and 2. Carol asked me to keep an eye on them while she showered. Julian was absorbed in his own world with his new coloring book and crayons. From my perch on the couch I observed Darius toddle over to his older brother and reach back as far as his little arm could, then WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAP! slapped Julian and began to wail as if his older brother had hit him. A dripping, sudsy Carol ran out of the bathroom and began fussing, "Julian, what did you do to your brother?!"

"Not one thing," I said. "Sibling rivalry at work, if I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it. He's only two! He is coming to church with me!"

Perhaps, Abel may not have been so innocent after all, I thought to myself. Parents tell me stuff like that happens between older and younger siblings a lot.

It is astounding to watch adult siblings interact. Time bends and suddenly, the accomplished information-technology executive responsible for large computer systems becomes my baby brother (that is my youngest brother; at 44, he is still my baby brother) and defers to me in most matters.

Birth order matters

Kevin Leman, author of *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*, looks at the way birth order impacts us. He describes oldest children as being responsible, reliable, hard-working, driven, and natural leaders. He says middle children are peace-makers, diplomats, team players, and affable, with lots of friends. Youngest children, he writes, tend to be people-persons—they enjoy the spotlight, and can be charming and manipulative.

While this list can be challenged, I have certainly seen some of these characteristics show up in my interactions with my brothers and even in work relationships.

One of my best working relationships was with a male colleague who was the youngest of three siblings, with two older sisters. No, I did not boss him around! But we understood each other very well. We just *got* each other, which I attribute to our respective birth orders.

In the Old Testament, the sibling groups we hear about the most are brothers: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph and his brothers, and even Moses and Aaron. Miriam, Aaron and Moses' sister, was the oldest, but we hear little about her. Perhaps her part in Israel's deliverance was overshadowed by plagues (Exodus 8, 9, 12) and the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14)?

We know she kept careful watch over Moses as he floated in a basket among the tall grasses along the edge of the Nile (Exodus 2:4). We know the story of her taking up a tambourine and inviting the women and all gathered in communal singing at God's triumph over Egypt and the escape from Pharaoh's chariots (Exodus 15:20–21). Then, there was that incident when she was stricken with leprosy (Numbers 12:10). But she was the first person to be named a prophet in the Old Testament (Exodus 15:20).

I have a natural affinity with Miriam. No, I am not a prophet, in fact, far from it. I am, however, an oldest sister. Interestingly, the age between my brothers and me approximates the age spread between Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. Jewish tradition tells us that Miriam was four years older than Aaron and seven years older than Moses. As 7-year-olds go, she was pretty mature for her age. Remember, Moses spent the first three months of his life at home with his family. Miriam helped care for her unnamed baby brother and worked to keep his identity secret to save his life.

We've got your back

Even when the little basket was set adrift on the Nile, Miriam was there. When Pharaoh's daughter found the baby, she had the insight to suggest the child's own

mother, their mother, nurse him. Perhaps the wisdom beyond her years earned her the title prophet. She put into motion a series of events that would lead to the deliverance of her people.

Moses comes into his identity and purpose with the support of his siblings, Miriam and Aaron. Aaron assisted him especially during those turbulent times of increased hard labor and oppression by Pharaoh. He stood at Moses' side as God dispensed nasty plagues. The three of them would cross the Red Sea to freedom.

The Miriam, Aaron, Moses triad was like a lot of sibling groups. They enjoyed each other's company and shared a closeness that often led to bickering. In other words, they gave each other a hard time. On the lighter side, my brother Chris, the youngest, and I used to tease John about being Mom's favorite. As children, we were a little jealous. As we age and my brothers are parents themselves, they have learned and taught me that parenting fairly does not mean treating each child the same. Each child is an individual with his or her particular needs. But it is still fun to tease John about being Mom's favorite.

We have had disagreements and misunderstandings that called for prayer and forgiveness. Even in those difficult times, I never doubted my brothers' love for me. Though I was blisteringly angry at times, God was in our midst bringing forth God's best gifts: healing and reconciliation.

As an older sister, I was fiercely protective of my brothers and made sacrifices for them. "Here, you can have that last cookie. Need help with your homework?" I shooed bullies away from John and walked Chris to school. I am still a little protective of them as they are of me.

As with many sibling relationships, rivalry reared its ugly head with these three Old Testament siblings. Miriam and Aaron began to complain about Moses. Complaints mounted and God intervened. Sure, Moses was God's appointed, but in defense of Miriam, you

can lose sight of that when you have changed someone's diaper as an infant. God appeared in the cloud and put an end to sibling strife:

*I, the LORD, speak to prophets in visions and dreams.
But my servant Moses is the leader of my people.
He sees me face to face, and everything I say to him
is perfectly clear.
You have no right to criticize my servant Moses."*

(Numbers 12:6b-8, Contemporary English Version)

After God chastised them, Miriam ended up with leprosy. In the spirit of a middle sibling, Aaron starts mediating and peace-making. He knows that he complained against Moses too. He asks God for forgiveness for them both. Moses, the youngest and favored, prays for his sister's healing.

God softened the punishment and she was shut out of the community for seven days. Rather than leave her alone in the desert, the people of Israel paused their exodus until she was restored to health.

Did the people stay at Moses' command or out of a sense of loyalty? Scripture doesn't say, but I like to think that her brothers were looking after her best interests. Though they fought through their disagreement, they found a way forward.

Miriam, prophet, older sister together with her younger brothers, Aaron and Moses, would lead Israel from bondage to freedom to the promise land that they would never live to enjoy.

But God gave them the jubilation, frustration, consolation, agitation, and joy found among many sisters and brothers. I thank God for my brothers, John and Chris. They continue to help me to grow in my understanding of what it means to be a child of God and a sister to the baptized and all creation. 🌸

The Rev. Angie Shannon is sister to John and Chris. Sharing the ministry of reconciliation with many, she is an intentional interim who *flips* congregations. She currently lives in Angola, Ind.



Make a Joyful Noise

by Audrey West



MY adopted hometown in Pennsylvania calls itself the Christmas City. Beginning at Thanksgiving, enormous neon Advent candles stand at attention atop the bridges into town, counting down the Sundays before December 25. Streetlights serve as stanchions for 800 or so lighted Christmas trees, multi-colored lights on one side of town, white lights on the other.

Tourists arrive from across the country to visit historic downtown and shop at the white-tented *Christ-kindelmarkt* that rises up for the season like a snowy mountain peak in a nearby parking lot. A live Christmas pageant, complete with four horses, three camels, goats, sheep, and a donkey takes place next to the reconstructed log cabin representing the town's first building. We may be one of the few remaining cities in the country in which a nativity scene and lighted tree share the grounds of city hall.

Then there is the music. During December audio speakers hidden in the downtown trees pipe out a continuous stream of Christmas carols, ranging from instrumentals of *Joy to the World* to Bing Crosby singing *Here Comes Santa Claus*. The church at the end of the block hosts noontime organ concerts, while elementary students serenade visitors outside the public library. The music department of the local college, housed in one of the community's oldest 18th-century stone buildings, performs Advent vespers each year, with a choral and instrumental program that runs the gamut from festive chorales to Zimbabwean folk music to the haunting strains of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."

The power of music to shape faith

Music has been central to the city's identity since it received its official name from Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, a German Lutheran pastor and spiritual leader of the Moravian missionaries who arrived here in 1741. Gathering with the small band of settlers for its first Christmas Eve worship service, Zinzendorf

led the congregation in one of his own hymns, "Jesus, Still Lead On" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 624). It is said that he was inspired by the second verse—"Not Jerusalem; lowly Bethlehem, 'twas that gave us Christ to save us; not Jerusalem"—as he announced the new community's name. Bethlehem.

It is no surprise that a hymn stanza played a key role in naming Bethlehem. The Moravians, who founded the city, placed a high value on music and the expression of their theology through hymns. Already by 1742, the Bethlehem Moravians possessed horns, flutes, and several stringed instruments to "make a joyful noise to the Lord" (Psalms 100:1). Before long, a trombone choir routinely sounded forth on church holy days, announced community births and deaths, and supported congregational singing.

Zinzendorf composed thousands of hymn stanzas, many of them for the traditional Moravian service of song called a *Singstunde*. Akin to a hymn sing, each *Singstunde* is developed around a particular theme that tells a story—for example, the Christmas story, or a story of discipleship—so that the word is proclaimed through music rather than a spoken sermon.

Then and now, music takes center stage in the Moravian expression of faith. Even today, when asked, "What do Moravians believe?" many will respond, "Listen to our hymns."

The power of music to call on God

The early Moravian settlers stood in a long tradition that associated music with a religious community's expressions of joy and hope, sorrow and fear. As we have seen in Kay Ward's Bible study, the Psalms represent music of the people of God, collected over centuries and functioning in a variety of ways. "Sing to the Lord a new song," they proclaim (Psalms 98:1), and "raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp" (81:2). Even the heavens proclaim the

glory of God (19:1). There are psalms to sing prayers for God's justice (75), seek God's protection (23), or celebrate God's reign (99). Still others offer entreaties for healing (116) or thanksgiving for recovery from illness (103). Psalms provide music of lament (77) and songs of hope (121).

As early as the book of Genesis, music is a key element in the biblical story. One of the offspring of Cain is described as "the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe" (Genesis 4:21).

More familiar, perhaps, are the celebrations of song and dance recorded in Exodus 15. After Moses leads the Israelites out of danger from Egypt and through the Red Sea, the people sing this song:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea...
Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, doing wonders? (Exodus 15:1, 11)

With the aid of tambourine and dance,
Miriam leads the women in a similar refrain:
Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. (Exodus 15:21)

The same event would have caused the ancient Egyptians to grieve the loss of sons serving in Pharaoh's army. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to imagine the intensity of the Israelites' relief and their desire to praise God at being released from torturous years of bondage. Nor is it difficult to imagine how slaves in our own country would later appropriate the Exodus story into their own hopes and longings for freedom. The words are as ancient as the Bible, but the desires they express are as close at hand as the cotton fields.

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh, to let my people go. ("When Israel was in Egypt's Land," *With One Voice* 670)

The power of music to comfort

A Moravian pastor writing in the late 1800s recounts the story of a woman who was expected to die soon. The youthful members of the trombone choir, having neglected their duty to practice, began to rehearse the music that was traditionally played at the burial service. It was summer, and the sounds of their rehearsal wafted through the open windows and over to the woman's apartment.

Rising from her bed, she called out, "The rascals! They think that I am dying! But I will not die from being sick!" She survived her illness. The young trombonists, "having unwittingly scandalized the congregation," were relieved of their duties shortly thereafter [See Bethlehem Digital History Project, <http://tinyurl.com/ka49mkj>]

History demonstrates the power of music to soothe a troubled soul. When the biblical King Saul was an old man, he was tormented by an "evil spirit." At the advice of his servants, Saul sent for a son of Jesse from Bethlehem who was skilled in playing the lyre. That young man was David, known to later generations as the shepherd who slew Goliath and became the great King of Israel. He was also perhaps the greatest musician of the Bible, and it is to him that many of the Psalms are attributed. The writer of 1 Samuel recounts that "Whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hands and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him" (1 Samuel 16:23).

Today research into Alzheimer's disease and other dementias demonstrates the power of music to improve mood, trigger memories, and calm agitated patients. Even people who are not ill can testify to the power of music to keep fear at bay or to cope with a particularly stressful situation, and many a harried parent has found respite in a CD of children's songs that capture the attention of restless young ones. I can always tell when my spouse has had a difficult day at work when

he comes home, cranks up the stereo, and blasts his favorite (but jarring to my ears) Jimmy Hendrix tunes, followed by a more sedate selection of classical music.

Hospice and palliative care teams also have discovered the soothing power of music for patients at the bend of life and their families. Building on this discovery, small groups of singers from dozens of Threshold Choirs across the country offer to sing at the bedsides of the sick and dying.

Every Thursday afternoon for the past two and a half years, three women from such a choir have visited my parents' house in order to bring the gift of music to my father. Like King Saul, he is tormented by an "evil spirit," which we know to be Lewy Body dementia. A couple of weeks after Dad was admitted into home hospice services, the women began to visit regularly, bringing with them only their voices and a rotating collection of gentle tunes. For a half hour or so their songs smooth the rocky path in a long journey to the end of life. Their music is peace. (For information about Threshold Choir, see <http://thresholdchoir.org>.)

The power of music to change the world

Around the globe and across millennia of human existence, music has transmitted customs and traditions while also confronting them. Consider the roll of music in the recent Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, for example, or several decades ago during the Vietnam protests in the United States. Within our own homes, generations of teenagers have discovered the power of music to define their friendships, challenge the status quo, and express intense emotion.

Music has the power to change the world.

In the Gospel of Luke, a four-part musical overture announces God's earth-shaking good news. Mary's "Magnificat," Zechariah's song, the Gloria of the heavenly host, and Simeon's hymn of praise proclaim the mighty power of God who "has brought down the powerful from their throne and lifted up the lowly"

(Luke 1:52). "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel," Zechariah sings, for "the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:68, 79).

We join their song in worship. Advent candles anticipate the in-breaking of God's reign: "O come, O come Emmanuel" (*ELW* 283). Christmas Eve candlelight accompanies our voices: "Silent night, holy night! Son of God, love's pure light" (*ELW* 281). Our longings find voice in the music of Epiphany: "Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid" (*ELW* 303). Scripture and music proclaim it: Jesus is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome.

Every year on Christmas Eve, as it has done for about 250 years, a trombone choir announces the birth of Christ from the bell tower of the oldest Moravian church in Bethlehem, Pa. A single candle in each window of the surrounding buildings illumines the night, while a five-pointed, 81-foot-high star shines from the top of the mountain just south of town. These are among the season's reminders that God comes to us in the child born to Mary in that first Bethlehem, half a world away and more than two millennia ago.

About three months later, as the sun breaks the horizon on Easter morning, the trombones will resound again. From the middle of a graveyard just a stone's throw away from Central Church, they will lead the gathered community in a musical proclamation of the best news of all. "The day of resurrection, earth tell it out abroad, the passover of gladness, the passover of God. From death to life eternal, from sin's dominion free, our Christ has brought us over with hymns of victory" (*ELW* 361). 🌿

Audrey West is the author of *Gather's* 2012–13 Bible study, "Gathered by God." Her husband, Frank Crouch, is a Moravian pastor. Audrey is a good friend of current Bible study author and Moravian Bishop Kay Ward.



by Terri Lackey

SAFEPLACE PROTECTS WOMEN AND CHILDREN



We all learned the story of Moses' precarious beginnings in Sunday school. To protect him from death at the hands of an evil king, his mother placed him in a basket on the banks of a river, and his sister, Miriam, stood watch until someone found him and took him in.

Moses is not the only child who has benefited from the goodness of others. Even in today's society, children need protection from "evil kings," and SafePlace in Olympia, Wash., does just that.

"SafePlace children's program advocates for children and teen victims of domestic and sexual violence, providing them safety at our shelter," said Thomasina Cooper, development director at SafePlace.

Thanks to your gifts to Women of the ELCA grants program, you also provide that protection by helping make some of SafePlace services for children available. In 2013, a \$5,000 grant was awarded to SafePlace for its children's program.

A non-profit organization serving as the only advocacy agency and confidential

shelter for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in its county, SafePlace helped 244 people in 2012, 85 of whom were children, Cooper said.

"By the time someone comes to our shelter, they are pretty desperate for assistance," she said. "Nobody wants to go to a shelter."

Cooper said most of those who appeal to SafePlace for help have "very little income. Ninety percent last



HELPING WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Inez Torres Davis, Women of the ELCA's director for justice, oversees the Women of the ELCA grant process. Your gifts to Women of the ELCA make healing programs like the one at SafePlace possible.

Torres Davis said a grants committee evaluates each program to determine which will get funding. All have as a main purpose helping women and children. In 2013, \$68,000 went to 27 projects—20 domestic and seven international. That's about \$9,000 more than awarded in 2012, she said. It is the sup-

port of programs like these that is at the core of the purpose of Women of the ELCA, making a positive difference in the lives of women and children, she said. You too can make a difference by sending a designated gift to the grants program of Women of the ELCA. For more information about grants, visit the Web site at www.womenoftheelca.org and click on the tab, Our Work.

The next round of grant proposals will be accepted between December 15, 2013, and February 15, 2014.

The SafePlace staff demonstrating how the work they do is intertwined.

year were below median income." Before they finally turn to SafePlace, many "often stay with their friends on a couch or live in their cars. Sexual assault is the leading cause of homelessness among women and children."

Founded in 1981, SafePlace operates 24-hours a day and is available to support survivors through crisis intervention, advocacy, and helping them with a plan to stay safe. It offers free and confidential services to people who have experienced all forms of domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

"We value survivor autonomy and safety. Our goal is to empower survivors to make their own decisions about their relationships and lives, provide them with options and resources, and to be a sounding board for those in crisis," Cooper said. In her nine years of working for SafePlace, Cooper said she has seen "quite a few

success stories." Women of the ELCA grant money is helping SafePlace run its children's program for kids between the ages of two and 18, Cooper said. Employees at SafePlace never call it a shelter in front of the children, she said. "We call it the house."

"The children have witnessed their mothers become disempowered. That has a terrible impact in many, many ways," Cooper said. "We also help mothers who feel disempowered reclaim their parenting skills."

SafePlace works to stop the cycle of violence, identify safety plans for the children, and "just help them feel safe.

"At SafePlace we want to break generational violence completely," Cooper said. "We know that might be Pollyanna, but that's our goal." 🌸

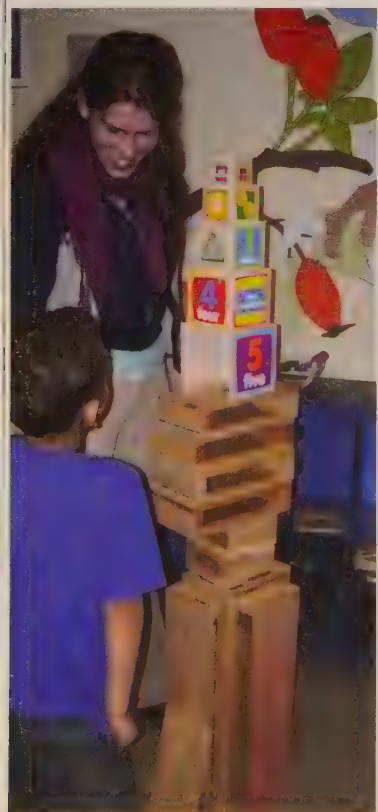
Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Gather*.

Women of the ELCA 2013 Domestic Grant Awards by Synodical Region



(above) SafePlace Executive Director, Mary Pontarolo with Rev. Suzanne Appelo, of Gull Harbor Lutheran Church.

(below) Playing with blocks, a SafePlace advocate guides a rescued child through role-modeling healthy non-violent communication.



Anchorage Faith & Action-Congregations Together (1A) \$5,000

Health Care Access, Anchorage, Alaska Empowers women to address health care in Alaska, specifically access for senior women through Medicare and Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act.

SafePlace (1C) \$5,000

Children's Program, Olympia, Wash. Provides advocacy to child and youth victims of domestic and sexual violence residing at the emergency shelter and support to help mothers reclaim their parenting.

Black Women for Wellness (2B) \$2,000

Kitchen Divas Program, Los Angeles, Calif. A nutritional health program that demonstrates healthy cooking options through interactive classes where community chefs prepare healthy foods and participants incorporate to achieve healthier lifestyles.

Survivors of Torture, International (Survivors) (2C) \$3,000

Healing the Scars of Torture Endured by Women and Children, San Diego, Calif. Continues specialized medical care and case management filling gaps of service to these women, children, and families. Asylum seekers are not eligible for employment, medical benefits, or other social services while they await the outcome of their asylum cases.

First Lutheran Church (3A) \$3,000

Hope and Healing Retreat for Survivors of Domestic Violence, Bottineau, N.D. Offers survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault an opportunity to come together in a safe and nurturing environment for emotional and spiritual healing.

Lutheran Domestic Violence Initiative (3H) \$3,000

Domestic Violence Education in ELCA Congregations, Shoreview, Minn. Works with Faith Trust Institute to fulfill its goal of developing a replicable model and resources that address the issues of domestic violence in congregations with a goal of providing a safe place to all members.

Lakota Lutheran Center, Inc. (4A) \$1,950

Cultivating Lakota Women Leadership for Persons with Disabilities, Scottsbluff, Neb. Establishes advocacy workshops and training for women to help people who are disabled and differently abled in their daily lives.

Central American Martyrs Center/Su Casa Catholic Worker (5A), \$2,550

Hospitality Program, Chicago, Ill. Offers transitional housing to homeless Spanish-speaking families who are survivors of domestic violence.

**Lutheran Social Service of Illinois
(5A) \$3,000**

Prison and Family Ministry,
Des Plaines, Ill.
Supports and defends families by
helping fund buses to transport children
to visit their mothers in prison.

**Lutheran Church of the Reforma-
tion, (5J) \$3,000**

Infant Safe Sleep Ministry,
Milwaukee, Wis.
Designates a "safe sleep champion"
to be trained to hold events within the
church and its impoverished neighbor-
hood with city.

**Public Health Partnership of Licking
County (6F) \$3,000**

Cervical Cancer Screening
Initiative, Newark, Ohio
Provides free cervical cancer screenings
for women ineligible under current pro-
grams who are uninsured, low income
and/or under age 40 in Licking County
Ohio.

PBJ Connections (6F) \$2,000

Empower PEERS Program,
Pataskala, Ohio
Offers equine assisted therapy and
learning for pre-teen and teen girls to
learn to control behaviors, improve
self-esteem, gain insight into their
issues, communicate more effectively,
and build stronger relationships.

**Brazilian Immigrant Center (7B)
\$3,000**

Domestic Workers Project of Fair-
field County, Bridgeport, Conn.
Through organizing, advocacy, education,
leadership, and capacity building, joins
immigrant workers and their families in
the fight against economic and social
marginalization by working to create
a more just society.

**Maternity Care Coalition (7F)
\$2,000**

MOMmobile at Riverside Correc-
tional Facility, Philadelphia, Pa.
Provides support and services for
incarcerated pregnant and parenting
women, many of whom have a history
of trauma.

**Israel's Creek Lutheran Parish (8F)
\$1,500**

Community Partners, Delaware, Md.
A collective of rural churches that part-
ners with schools and neighbors to feed
students and families living below the
poverty line. Also provide household
items and affirming activities.

**Saint Nicholas Lutheran Church (8G)
\$2,500**

Elementary School (Remedial)
Reading Day Camp, Huntingtown, Md.
Day camp pilot program that helps
Title I students, grade 1-3, in need of
remedial reading skills.

**Cabarrus Coop Christian Ministry
(9B) \$2,000**

Mother/Children Housing Ministry,
Concord, N.C.
Provides housing, tools, and support to
empower single mothers with children
to move beyond homelessness towards
independence.

Ruth House (9B) \$1,800

Ruth's House at Play!,
Washington, N.C.
Provides playground equipment for
Ruth's House. This equipment will allow
women and children to socially interact
with one another in a safe, fun, and
loving environment.

**Appalachian Helping Hands (9D)
\$2,000**

Bible Promises Health Kits for
Women, Greenville, Tenn.
Offers hope and health care for women
affected by poverty in Appalachia.

**Lutheran Services of Georgia, Inc.
(9D) \$2,500**

Empowering Refugee Women
through Education, Atlanta, Ga.
Empowers recently arrived refugee
women to gain life skills to successfully
assimilate into the U.S. culture.

2013 International Grants by Country

GHANA

Baako Ye Project, Inc.

Medical Program of the Baako Ye Project **\$2,000**

Provides healthcare services to reduce maternal and infant death, teenage pregnancy, malnutrition, and disease including HIV/AIDS in an impoverished area of Ghana within 32 rural communities.

INDIA

Rural People Development Society

Prevention of Tuberculosis from Cotton Industries and Alternate Employment **\$1,500**

Emphasizes prevention and control of tuberculosis among women workers of cotton industry through orientations, counseling, and referral services to hospitals while encouraging and supporting alternate employment.

KENYA

Pamoja Group

Abused Women's House of Care and Hope **\$2,000**

Attempts to alleviate the psychological and mental stress and suffering experienced by women who live in abused marriages and are constantly beaten by their spouses.

PERU

Highland Support Project

Andean Women Knitting Hopes **\$3,000**

Improves the position of poor, Quechua-speaking women in the rural areas near Cusco, Peru, through the knowledge and sustained practice of their citizenship and economic rights.

PHILIPPINES

Friends of Alouette International

Centre for Abused Girls—Food for Body and Soul **\$2,500**

Provide sustainable healthy food, income, life skills training and total well-being by building and stocking a henhouse and providing daily hygiene packs and spiritual reading for the girls.

ROMANIA

Ratiu Foundation for Democracy

Not for Sale—Choose for Your Own Sake **\$2,000**

Addresses human trafficking by providing literacy and gender based violence education to at-risk women, including survivors who receive medical support to prepare them for rehabilitation.

UGANDA

Foundation for Uganda Women Development

Ferrocement Water Harvest for Women and Well/Spring Protection **\$2,000**

Provides a sustainable supply of clean water for drinking, cooking, and washing hence water security, hygiene, and sanitation in 60 poor families.



Highland Support Project, Cusco, Peru, supports women in rural areas through its knitting project.

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MIRIAM, A LOVING PROTECTOR

by Kay Ward

IN GOOD COMPANY:
STORIES OF BIBLICAL WOMEN

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 4

Theme verse

“When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.” Exodus 2:3–4

Hymn

“What Child Is This?” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 296)

Overview

New birth is the theme of this session as experienced in the saving of baby Moses on the Nile, the infant Jesus born in a stable, and a story of mothers and grandmothers everywhere. Our Old Testament lesson begins with Miriam at the river’s edge with her baby brother and follows the rest of her life as a prophet with her brothers Moses and Aaron.

With a Psalm in our Heart

READ PSALM 149.

Our song for this month is a short psalm of praise. It is the song sung among the gathered community, the people of Israel, who acknowledge God as their king and their creator. There is a declaration at the very beginning: “Sing to the Lord a new song.”

We can see that this psalm marks a joyous occasion, and the singers are pulling out all the stops to get the praising done. There is dancing with tambourines, which seem to be a preferred instrument of the dancing women. Joy abounds in the first five verses, even end-

ing with the worshipers singing on their couches.

Those first five verses are being sung by people with a wonderful sense of well-being. They glow in the countenance of God’s face, and they, a humble people, enjoy the victory that their God ensures.

There is, however, an abrupt change in verse 6, “Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands.” This is the turning point of the psalm and it begins the call to action for vengeance. The remainder of the psalm deals with God’s vengeance exercised in the hand of God’s people. This psalm might sound like the voice of the powerful acting to defend their position that, with God’s help and at God’s command, they have fought to claim. Or, this psalm could be the voice of a small community fighting against some huge empire. Then, after the harangue of vengeance, the psalm ends with a final “Praise the Lord.”

1. How could this psalm have been used to incite people to war? How do you see the psalm? Do you see it as a song of the victors or a song of the oppressed? What phrases from the psalm would support your opinion?
2. Can you think of examples of songs that have been used to encourage or incite people?

A Story from the Old Testament

in Miriam

One of the interesting things about the story of Miriam is that we can follow her entire life, beginning with her as a young girl, through her generative years, ending with her death. Her story parallels the event of the Exodus, beginning with the birth of Moses, and it is told in three acts.

READ EXODUS 2:1–10, MIRIAM THE GIRL

AND HER BROTHER MOSES

There are many characters who aren't named in what we could call Act 1 of this biblical drama. They include the wife of the head of the house of Levi who married and had a son. That is where the trouble began. This story took place in Egypt where the Hebrew people had been held in bondage for hundreds of years. There was a new king in Egypt, a new king that did not remember Joseph. The Israelites had prospered in Egypt even under the harsh conditions, and the king was getting worried that the slave population, on which he depended, would get so large that they would join forces to overcome the Egyptians.

The king developed a plan. First, the king commanded the overseers to be even more ruthless with the slaves, making them work impossibly long hours and demanding increased production of materials to build the growing Egyptian cities. To make things worse, he demanded that they remove the straw that the slaves had been using to make bricks. Still the Israelites grew in numbers.

The king then enlisted the help of his midwives and told them that they were to kill all the baby boys born to the Hebrew women. When that plan failed to produce the desired effect, the king commanded that all baby boys born to the Hebrews were to be thrown into the Nile and drowned, but girl babies could live.

This certain man and this certain woman gave birth to a son. They knew what the king had commanded

so they hid the baby boy for a few months. When it was no longer possible to hide him, the mother made a boat for her baby boy and placed him in the river, but she didn't leave the child alone. She sent her daughter to watch over the child. Up to this point, we still don't have names for any of the characters. (See "Spirit of Protection," p. 14.)

3. What do you notice that is interesting about the appearance of the sister? Who do you think is the heroine of this story?

Another unnamed woman appeared, this time from the court of the king. The Pharaoh's daughter found the baby and it just happened that there was a little girl by his side who knew where she could find a wet nurse for him.

4. The Pharaoh's daughter takes pity on the baby boy. What thoughts might have been going through her head when she saw the basket? How do you think her father, the Pharaoh, reacted?

So Act 1 ends. And the baby, now named Moses, was nursed by his biological mother, Jochobed, in the palace with the Pharaoh's daughter acting as his mother. (We find her name in other chapters, for example, in Numbers 26:59.) When Moses grew to be an adult, he claimed his Hebrew heritage and, along with his brother Aaron, appealed to the Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt.

READ EXODUS 15:20–21, THE SONG OF MIRIAM

Act 2 is a short act, only two verses. But it continues the story of the young girl. Now the sister also has a name, Miriam, and we learn she is the sister of Aaron and Moses. She is also the first person in the Old Testament to be called a prophet, a spokeswoman for God. The texts don't give us nearly enough information about how she acted as a prophet for her people. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have more stories about her?

Miriam is also the first woman to be named as a singer and dancer. I can see her leading the women in the victory song with a tambourine in her hand, dancing as she sang. It is curious that the tiny song attributed to Miriam is tacked onto the longer Song of Moses. Perhaps it is just a refrain or a victory shout, and it might have originated from the time of the Exodus, before the full text of the Song of Moses was composed. Some call it the first national anthem; it is likely among the oldest songs in the Old Testament.

Both Psalm 81 from the Hannah chapter, and Psalm 149, which began our study this month, refer to tambourines being used in celebration. Some have suggested that Miriam is the one “taking her tambourine and going forth in the dance of the merry-makers,” though she is not named in the text. That is certainly a nice thought.

READ NUMBERS 12, MIRIAM CLASHES WITH MOSES

Decades pass between Act 2 and Act 3, but we don't know exactly how long after the Exodus, this next story takes place. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam became leaders of God's new covenant with God's people following the Exodus. The people of Israel grew in their understanding as a nation politically and spiritually, with cultic laws and practices to govern their lives.

The three siblings were effective leaders for the people, with a distinct hierarchy in place. But Miriam was not satisfied with third ranking under her brothers. She wondered whether God was speaking only through her brothers, and she did not approve of the woman Moses had married, who was a foreigner. After all, wasn't Miriam a prophet too? She may have felt a bit self-righteous, because marrying within the community was an important consideration for the Israelites as they interacted with other peoples. However the criticism was intended, Miriam clearly questioned the authority of Moses, and she did it in public. God called the three siblings to step outside the tent and appeared

in a cloud and reminded them that Moses did have a closer relationship with God than the other two. That isn't all that happened. When God disappeared, Moses and Aaron turned to see that Miriam was covered with leprosy. Both brothers felt bad. (I would think Aaron would feel especially bad because he had been conspiring with Miriam.)

So Moses interceded on Miriam's behalf and asked God to heal her. God heard the prayer and Miriam returned to health, but she was shut out of the camp for a week. The people, however, honored her by saying that they would wait until she was able to travel before they moved on. (See “Miriam, Angie and Their Brothers,” p. 18.)

5. What does the action of the people tell you about Miriam's position in the camp?

A Story from the New Testament

The Birth of Jesus

READ LUKE 2:1-20 AND LUKE 1:46-55.

I could not read the story of the little girl Miriam and her mother Jochebed without thinking of another young mother. This young mother was far away from her home and lacked the companionship of older women to help with the birthing process (at least no midwives are mentioned). She delivered her baby boy and wrapped him up with bands of cloth (we used to say swaddling clothes).

This Christmas story from Luke is Mary's story, told from her perspective. One verse that has garnered controversy is Luke 2:5, “He [Joseph] went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.” The fact that Mary was expecting a child seemed not to trouble Joseph. He took the responsibility of registering the two of them (soon-to-be three) in Bethlehem. Even if he didn't claim paternity, he took responsibility as Mary's future husband and he was there at the birth of her child.

- 6 Most Christians traditionally say that Mary conceived in a miraculous way. Some say that she became pregnant in the usual human way and the miracle occurred as God chose the child she was carrying to be the Messiah, God's own son. What do you say? How does this part of the Christmas story affect your faith?

There are at least two signs in this birth narrative that connect the birth of Jesus with King David. Bethlehem was called the city of David, and the announcement to the shepherds reminds us that David began his life as a shepherd.

- 7 Luke 2:19 says that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." From the verses prior to verse 19, what words do you think Mary was treasuring? In her quiet heart, as a young mother, what do you think she might have been pondering?

The Bible Tells Us So—Extra Credit

The story of Miriam, Moses, and Aaron has much background information. Pick a few stories listed here to help you understand this important period of the Hebrew people.

Look at Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 6:3 for references to Amram, the father, and Jochebed, the mother.

READ EXODUS 5:6–19 for a discussion of a very harsh command of the king. Our language still uses a phrase from this story.

Turn to Exodus 1:8–22 for more of the story of how the midwives responded to Pharaoh's command to the midwives to kill the male children of the Hebrews. What do you think of their explanation to the king as to why the males survive?

- 8 Any mother or father who looks upon their newborn children wonders what they will be when they grow up. What dreams will they have? Will they be strong and healthy? As you look around at your family or your small circle of friends, what things do you ponder?
- 9 Mary's Song (Luke 1:46–55), often called the Magnificat, connects Mary with the lowly and needy and sets the scene for the ministry of Jesus. What parts of the song express God's concern for the poor and which sound like the words of a young mother? What similarities do you see with the other songs we have studied?

A Story from Today a New Grandmother

I am the most dangerous of all human beings. Total strangers cross the street when they see me coming. Small children wilt under my gaze. My mere presence can scare the strongest grownups. I am a new grandmother!

READ EXODUS 1:22 for the words of the command. Who is the Pharaoh addressing and who is to do the throwing into the Nile?

Exodus 15:1–19 contains the Song of Moses. What do you remember about God's call to Moses in Exodus 3–4 that might make this Song of Moses ironic? Does the text tell us anything about relationship between Aaron and Moses? Miriam isn't mentioned in this particular song, but what part do you think she played in leading the people out of Egypt?

READ EXODUS 33:7–11 for a good description of the cloud at the entrance to the tent, also mentioned in connection with Miriam's leprosy in Numbers 12:5–10. Can you think of leaders who seem to have God's favor but are challenged by others? By what emotion are such challenges motivated?

I am a crazed woman. Not a conversation goes by without my interjecting some information about my new granddaughter, Nadia. When I see small children, they remind me that Nadia will do those same things when she is their age.

Any woman I meet over the age of 60 who looks in any way like a grandmother becomes fair game for me. I am in her face with questions. "Do you have any grandchildren? How old are they? Where do they live?" Of course, I am just waiting for them to ask me about my grandchild. I am priming the pump.

At a fast food restaurant, activity in the next booth draws my attention. An older couple is dining with a little girl, who is enjoying her hamburger and smearing ketchup all over her face. I try to get the woman to look my way and, when she can no longer ignore me, she smiles. This signal is all I need to launch into my story about how I can hardly wait until Nadia is old enough for me to take her out for a hamburger.

I am a dangerous woman, fiercely vigilant with a string of pictures as long as my arm. I never tire of telling the same story over and over again. I hear myself and am mystified that one small infant could so easily distract me from everything else.

I remind myself that this has actually happened to other women before me, but it is hard to take that idea seriously. For this event is so unique, this baby so perfect, that I am stunned. This is a cosmic reality to which I alone am privy.

This small baby girl and her calm, beautiful mother, our daughter, have filled huge places in my heart that I didn't know were empty. I hold this dear one and marvel at her: mouth working as she sleeps, tiny fingers holding the edge of a blanket. I feast on this small, peaceful face.

This is an advent for me. For in this small face, I see love, peace, and hope. This birth, all births, hold that promise. Only God could have created the perfect love that we see in the face of an infant.

I am reminded of that other birth, so long ago in a stable. I'll bet Mary's mother, wherever she was, felt the same way I do. I'll bet she couldn't wait to tell the rest of the family. I'll bet she worried and prayed for her new grandson. "And he has the cutest way of wrinkling up his nose when he's hungry." "And he has the dearest sweet chin that..." You have heard all this before? Well, that's what grandmothers do. (Grandfathers can be just as smitten. Read "Walter and Me," on p. 6.)

The Bible Tells Me So—Extra Credit

READ MATTHEW 2:1-18.

Once again, we have a king who threatened baby boys. This time, the fear was based on a rumor that a baby boy had been born that would become the king of the Jews. Is this a deliberate echo of the story of Moses? In what ways?

This rumor motivated some travelers from the East to try to find this particular baby boy. Herod said that he wanted to know where the new king might be so that he, Herod, could go worship him.

The travelers (warned by a dream) saw through this ploy and decided not to return to Herod. So once again, a decree went out from the king to kill all the baby boys under two, just to make sure that this baby was destroyed.

There is a rich tradition that has developed about these travelers from the East. What bits of information have you gleaned from your celebrations of Christmas? How might you add the story of Moses to your Christmas tradition? In what sense is Jesus the new Moses, particularly in Matthew's gospel?

The Work of Our Hands

see the hands of the women in this lesson holding babies. We can imagine the mother of Moses, Jochebed, fashioning the little basket for her baby. Some suggest that it would have been a woven basket of some sort with pitch smeared all over it to make it waterproof. There might also have been a cover.

We have spoken in earlier chapters of using our hands to make things, to sew and knit and even to weave. But this story of Jochebed weaving a basket for her infant is almost too much to bear. In this case, the mother's hands, the same hands which have held and patted and caressed a baby, now make the vehicle of life or death for her baby.

I also see the hands of young Mary wrapping up her baby boy to keep him safe. It is what mothers and all caregivers of young infants do, wrap them up tightly so they will feel secure. In a way, women continue to do that with their loved ones no matter how old they are.

Praying Hands

I often watch women reaching for a baby or small child, and, as they hold the child, they immediately begin to rock from side to side. There is a natural, organic rhythm to that movement. Perhaps we all remember in some way that we were all rocked in our own mother's womb for all those months.

We rock when we hold children and we also rock ourselves when we are ill or sad. I have seen people in grief live out this same rocking motion, hugging themselves, bent over in sadness.

It is comforting to sit in rocking chairs or hammock. So, as we enter into a time of prayer, our praying hands will be rocking hands. Make a cradle of your hands, fingers interlocked, palms facing up. You can hold them still or you can use a little rocking movement as you pray. This is a basket on the Nile. This is a manger in Bethlehem. This is the cradle you were rocked in as a baby. Take a few moments before you begin your prayer

time to think about being held by God. Offer thanks to God for the people in your life who hold babies and for teachers who teach those babies.

Let us Pray

Holy God, we live in a world that feels scary and uncertain. Help us to find your peace in the midst of those feelings. And hear us now as we offer to you the names of those who we know that are struggling as families. Help us to be courageous in championing those causes in our community that can help, and forgive us for forgetting that we are called to be your hands in our world. In the name of your Son, the babe of Bethlehem, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hands to Work and Hearts to God

In your daily devotions, this month, try using the cradle prayer hands. (Go to gathermagazine.org for an illustration.) Even when you going about your day, take a minute and use the cradle to remind yourself that you are in God's hands. While you are waiting for water to boil or watching the news on television or sitting in a waiting room, use your praying hands.

What organizations or agencies in your community could use your expertise as a volunteer? Think especially of those that protect infants and children.

Advent is the perfect time to set some new directions for your life. Take a bit of time to consider again the old, old story of the birth of Christ. Maybe it's time for you to write your own Magnificat? Use Mary's song as a template and remind yourself again of the glory of God. Try not to use "churchy" words. Just use the words that come from your own experience and your own heart. 🌿

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Kay Ward is a bishop in the Moravian church. Ordained in 1979, she has served parishes in Indiana and California. Retired in 2006 as professor and administrator of Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Pa., she lives in a log cabin with her husband, Aden, in central Wisconsin.



FAMILY MATTERS

Stories in Song

by Elyse Nelson Winger

My people are herders.
We move with the seasons,
with the wet and the dry,
so that the cattle may be strong and well fed.

We cannot carry much with us,
and so our stories don't make their homes
in heavy books.
We hold our stories in our songs.

—Kek, a young Sudanese refugee in *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate

I tinkered, Gramma sat, and my daughter, Catherine, read. *Home of the Brave*, a free verse novel written by Katherine Applegate, was the latest in a string of make-your-mother-and-grandmother-cry-stories that Catherine had taken to reading aloud when the gift of uninterrupted time appeared. This beautifully crafted book told the story of a Sudanese refugee whose father has been killed and whose mother is missing, now being reunited with an aunt and cousin in a small American town. Kek becomes a fifth-grader and caretaker of a cow, who reminds him of home and connects him to a new community.

I listened to Catherine's lilting voice and remembered the Sudanese refugee children in Cairo, Egypt, who played with her when she was a toddler. I recalled the silly farmyard songs—replete with moos—that I used to sing with these same children at St. Andrew's children's education program. And I resisted the urge to weep—for these little ones whose lives were shattered by civil war, and for the shame I felt for having forgotten about them. Where did girls like Abouk and her sisters land? Are they, like the fictional Kek, resettled in Minnesota where in winter “children throw white balls at the not-dead trees”? Now young

women, have they finished high school, college? I listened to Catherine's voice give life to Kek's difficulties and dreams and through his story, remembered those children and heard the gospel again.

Christmas is coming and it's time to transport tins of holiday decorations down two flights and tie a tree on top of the car. I love these weeks of warm light and living pine, of Christmas books and Santa tales. But most of all, I love the piano, which comes alive with carols most nights of the season. This is the time when *we* “hold our stories in our songs.” Open our holiday music box and you will find arrangements of all kinds: four-part choral and children's unison, four-hand piano and jazzy solo, John Rutter and *Reader's Digest*. I love it all for these songs—old and new and global in scope—evoke the power of incarnation and promise at the heart of Christmas. The decorations and trees are delightful. But it is truly the songs that tell our stories this time of year.

Or do they? I mean: Do they tell the *whole* story? Not if we pay attention to the Gospel of Matthew, central to attention this new liturgical year. As theologian Larry Rasmussen has written: Matthew “is *not* the Christmas story we tell: the slaughter of 2-year-olds

the plotting of a powerful ruler against imagined, as well as real, enemies; the web of evil the Magi discover themselves a part of; the tender years of Jesus spent in exile" (*The Lutheran*, January 2006: <http://tinyurl.com/mt7zgrh>). Such images are as central to Christmas as Matthew's leading star and courageous Joseph, as Luke's rejoicing shepherds and marveling Mary. These stories await our song, too. And they include the story of Jesus the refugee.

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Matthew 2:13b).

And so they traveled: under cover of night, out of Bethlehem, through Arabia and into Egypt. And while they took refuge, children died and mothers wailed all around Bethlehem. Again, Rasmussen: "For Matthew the only Christmas story with credibility is one told in the presence of fear, threatened children and the specter of death." Imagine Joseph, having mustered the courage to marry an already-pregnant fiancée, now told to leave his carpenter's livelihood and home behind. Imagine Mary, new mother of a yet young child,

leaving a community of supportive and wise women. Imagine their grief upon learning of the murders of innocents, some of whom they surely knew and loved in their families and neighborhood. Imagine Jesus, son of displaced parents, refugee child.

These aren't the images we sing most nights at our piano or from the pews. But these are images we must add to our collection of songs, for they are the Christmas gospel, too. And they will help us see God's presence in—and our mission with—the displaced and refugee families of today.

Home of the Brave's Kek is a fictional character, but he's based on the real experiences of the Lost Boys of Sudan who traveled: out of villages in Southern Sudan, across desert, into Kenya. Thousands of boys died on the road of starvation and sickness. Thousands more spent years in a refugee camp awaiting news of their families and resettlement. Other Sudanese traveled, too: up the Nile River, past pyramids, into Cairo. These holy families sought (and still seek) refuge in places like

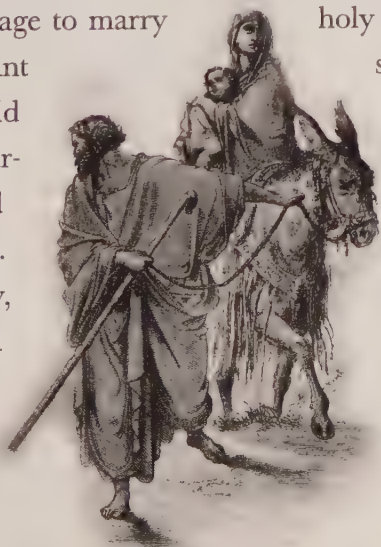
St. Andrew's United Church of Cairo, a longtime global mission site of the ELCA. There they found an international array of faithful people seeking

to respond to their overwhelming need and to serve with them as teachers, parents, and friends.

And some of them also found me: a young divinity school graduate, recently married to a professor in his first teaching post at The American University of Cairo, both of us seeking to find a place of meaning in that gorgeously gritty city of Cairo. And I am grateful that they did, for in their hope and perseverance amidst so much suffering and uncertainty, I learned more deeply about the power of faith, the presence of Jesus, and the mission of God than I had ever before.

This season, I have Catherine's book selection and Matthew's gospel to thank for helping me to remember their witness, their plight, and God's call alive in them for me and for us. And I also have a children's Christmas program to coordinate that, with hope, joy and light, will sing Jesus: the sweet baby in a manger *and* the child displaced in times of danger and fear sent that all people might know God is with them and that we might live with compassion and justice anew. That's the Christmas gospel, and that's what I want our children to sing. 🕊

The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger, an ELCA pastor, serves as University Chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel.





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GRACE NOTES

Active Waiting

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



We spend a lot of time waiting, don't we? Waiting to check out at the grocery store, waiting for the green light, waiting at a doctor's office. There's waiting that is full of anticipation and excitement, like waiting to turn 16 and get a driver's license or waiting for the birth of a child. There's waiting that is marked by dread and fear, like waiting for a medical diagnosis. Sometimes we simply while away the waiting time, and other times we make our waiting time productive.

Whether our waiting is hopeful, filled with dread, or just mundane, most waiting has one thing in common: We have little control over it. Maybe that's why I've never been good at waiting. I like control. The older I get, however, I've learned control is elusive. I've learned to loosen my grip a bit.

Since I'm not fond of waiting, it's a bit ironic that Advent is my favorite liturgical season. Perhaps it's the Spirit calling me into this season of waiting to help me grow. Over the many Advents I've experienced, I've come to practice an active sense of waiting. While I wait, but I'm not idle. I'm actively engaged in prayer, discernment, and planning. I've learned, too, that how I spend my waiting time can be preparation for the future. While I'm waiting, I'm equipping myself to handle some unknown experience.

I imagine there is much before you in these Advent days and in the new year for which you are currently preparing. Some things might be known, but much is likely unknown. Retirement, gradua-

tion, birth, a move, a new relationship, hardships ... these and more lie ahead in 2014. And while you ponder these things, you might have some more practical matters before you too—including some Christmas gift-giving decisions. I have two suggestions.

First, renew your own subscription to this magazine, and then give a subscription to all the women and girls on your Christmas gift list. *Gather* is an excellent companion for the faith journey, offering devotional and inspirational stories along with Bible study. The articles will console, challenge, and encourage, no matter what 2014 has to offer.

Second, plan to attend the Ninth Triennial Gathering next July. And invite a friend or daughter, niece or neighbor. When people ask what you'd like for Christmas, tell them they can pay a portion of your registration fee (it's discounted through January 6). Debbie Viele, an active participant from Diamondale, Mich., considers the triennial gathering a part of her spiritual practices, saying that attending the event is a discipline that nurtures her faith. Gathered in the community of more than 2,000 women, we will learn, praise, pray, laugh, dance, and serve. Like Debbie, you can support your faith journey by attending the triennial gathering. And you can support the faith journey of a friend or loved one by helping her attend too.

I'll be waiting for you in Charlotte next July. See you then, sisters. ☸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Pondering Between Times

by Catherine Malotky

O God, in the dark of

December there is plenty of time to ponder. Our mothers and grandmothers once spent long evenings gathered around fire telling stories from summer's exploits. It was a time to make meaning out of life, to ask questions and to understand, to pass it on.

These are not the only times that lend themselves to pondering. Like December, there are other times between the dark and the light, transitional times, when we wonder what it all means. Certainly it was such a time for little Miriam, as she watched over the precarious basket holding her infant brother. She must have wondered why, because she was a Hebrew, her family was enslaved and her brother's life was at risk. The forces that shaped her life were beyond her control and yet they governed her every move. What kind of pondering did she do to try to make sense of it?

Was the irony of the appearance of the Pharaoh's daughter apparent to her? Did she perceive that this woman—who discovered her brother's basket; who knew he was a Hebrew boy; who announced that he was her son—was the daughter of the Pharaoh who had declared the death sentence that threatened his life? How she must have pondered this turn of events!

Another Miriam, generations later, also lived under a dominating power. The Romans, in this generation, demanded that their subjects be registered, so she set off with her husband-to-be for Bethlehem, the city of David, because Joseph was of


David's line. The journey would have been demanding enough, but she was fully pregnant. A long ride on a donkey's back would not have been her choice. On top of this, had Joseph deemed her pregnancy a deal breaker, she would have been unmarried. The story says Joseph was not the father. He could have cast her aside, but did not.

Then, journey barely done, she gave birth, laboring in a stable. Shepherds came, not to threaten but to honor the newborn as Messiah. Long awaited, was this child the game-changer? No wonder the story reports that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19). For her, this was a between time, full of anticipation and wondering about what has transpired and what would be.

We, too, are Miriams. The circumstances of our lives are different, but we struggle with occupying powers, the demands of culture and self-expectations that so direct our days.

Between times are full of mystery to God. This December, give me the grace to recall the year past and ponder. This Advent, let me see the ironies and surprises of my life, your guidance and redemption, my griefs and my joys. Grant me time to create the story of my days in your embrace. Give me courage to give witness to your love. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.



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Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd.

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800-638-3522, ext. 2730

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